

PORN STUDIES

2021, AHEAD-OF-PRINT, 1-14

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1956366>



‘We watch porn for the fucking, not for romantic tiptoeing’: extremity, fantasy and women’s porn use

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the appeal of extreme imageries through a 2017 journalistic survey of 2438 participants on Finnish women’s approaches to, opinions on and preferences in porn, with a specific emphasis on responses addressing preferences deemed extreme. The respondents regularly positioned these pornographic fantasies in relation to the assumed tastes of other women while also addressing the complex and ambivalent roles that porn played in their ways of making sense of their sexual selves. By focusing on disconnections articulated both towards the category of women and within one’s sexual self when accounting for the attractions of extremity, this article also questions the ‘will to knowledge’ underpinning popular queries into women’s pornographic likes, asking how such data can be productively explored without reproducing the binary gender logic that structures it.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 February 2021

Accepted 6 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Extremity, porn use, women, methodology, Finland

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In 2017, I was contacted somewhat out of the blue by a producer for the lifestyle show *Jenny+* who asked whether I would be interested in reading through the survey materials on Finnish women's approaches to, opinions on and preferences in porn that they had just collected in order to provide contextual commentary for the programme. Without knowledge of further detail, I was fascinated by the mere number of respondents, 2438 women – the overwhelming majority (1637) being women aged 20–40 years – that was high in a country of 5.5 million people, and certainly of a much larger scale than my own previous studies of porn use in the country (Paasonen et al. 2015). Produced by the public service broadcasting company Yle, *Jenny+* was voted the most popular Finnish television lifestyle show of 2017. Initiated by the journalist Jenny Lehtinen, it foregrounded body positivity with a feminist bent and built on the popularity of her blog 'Jenny ja läskimyytinmurtajat' ['Jenny and the fat myth busters']. The show's first season ran parallel with Vaakakapina [Scale revolt], an online self-acceptance and well-being initiative by the same team. Addressed specifically at women, the porn questionnaire was accessible on Scale Revolt's website.

Reading through the files, I was particularly struck by answers to the unorthodox and leading question prompt: 'Is there a thing that turns you on, even if it feels confusing,

gross or weird? Tell more!’ In what follows, I examine answers to this question in order to account for how the study participants described their particular fascinations and framed the appeal of extremity and likes deemed marginal. Starting with methodological concerns connected to the survey that I was not part of designing, I move to addressing open-ended responses where the study participants positioned their likes in relation to sexual norms and the presumed likes of other women. More specifically, I examine both responses addressing assumptions concerning gendered tastes – those which women are assumed to like, and those which the survey participants themselves prefer – and those articulating gaps between pornographic preferences and one’s sense of self.

Building on the respondents’ descriptions of pornographic likes and fantasies as holding complex and ambivalent positions in their sexual lives, this article contributes to a growing body of empirical research on women’s porn use attending to both contextual nuance and the multiplicity of identity positions through which gendered relations are structured (for example, Juffer [1998](#); Ciclitira [2004](#); Smith [2007](#); Ashton, McDonald, and Kirkman [2018](#); Attwood, Smith, and Barker [2019](#); Goldstein [2020](#); Meehan [2020](#); Spišák [2020](#)). It further contributes to qualitative knowledge production on the appeal of extremity among female porn consumers outside frameworks seeking to identify the impact of pornographic scenes on women’s sexual fantasies, likes or levels of

tolerance (see Corne, Briere, and Esses 1992; Sun, Wright, and Steffen 2017).

By comparing the *Jenny+* inquiry into women's pornographic preferences with other similar journalistic queries, this article further questions the logic, or 'will to knowledge' (see Foucault 1990), where the broad category of gender operates as a point of identification and a strategy of classification that overrides other axes of difference, such as age, sexual orientation, social class, religion, ethnicity or profession. Despite the global female population encompassing some 3.8 billion people and hardly being uniform in any respect, popular accounts continue to probe and address women's pornographic preferences horizontally as telling of shared gender-specific desires. This popular interest – as manifested in questionnaires set up by journalists and in the media coverage of academic studies on the topic – operates through both tenacious generalization and perpetual surprise in instances where findings point to women enjoying hardcore scenarios of control, domination and submission, or other content deemed marginal and extreme. This article then asks what can be learned from surveys such as the one conducted for *Jenny+* and how these data can be analyzed without reproducing the binary gender logic that underpins it.

Ready-made data

The methodological issues involved in the survey are multiple. First of all, while relatively large scale, the survey was by no means representative, nor was it designed as

such. Like any openly available online survey, it likely attracted people interested in the specific topic who were willing to spend time on it. Judging from the number of questions and the length of some of the answers, these responses had taken time to compose. This probably resulted in an increased number of contributions from those who find porn important in their lives. The show's popularity lent the survey call visibility and resonance especially among the pro-feminist, predominantly female audience that followed and contributed to Scale Revolt's initiatives. In line with the overall profile of *Jenny+*, which attracted an audience base well versed in issues connected to gender equality and social justice, the survey responses addressed sexual tastes from a generally non-normative angle, often attending to gendered inequalities and relations of power. Answers to the open-ended questions were often casual in their tone and style, some including confessional notes decorated with emojis, as if echoing the informal and intimate modes that Lehtinen and her co-host Saara Sarvas used to communicate with their audience.

Second, given that the survey was set up as background research, and hence served an instrumental role in television production, it clearly differs from those conducted in scholarly settings – it was simply not conducted as an academic study. Collected fully anonymously and consisting of multiple-choice and open-ended questions charting both pornographic preferences and experiences of sex life and body image, the study was partly playful in tone. Due to the technical make-up, it was not possible to connect individual responses to the

participant's age (the only contextual or demographic factor inquired after) and it remained impossible to verify the respondents' age or gender identifications. The survey was targeted at women, contributors were assumed to self-identify as such, and this is all that we can know of the matter. Furthermore, it is impossible to judge from the files available where a singular response ends and another begins – and, consequently, how many responses exactly there were to any singular question. This sets obvious limits for quantitative analysis.

Third, and in connection with the previous points, the questions asked differed from those that scholars are likely to take on, from inquiring whether a facial cum shot, a bleached anus or a fog machine (*sic*) were 'hot or not' to asking people to describe the kinds of porn scenes they would like to see (a selection of these were later made into podcasts). The survey question that this article focuses on ('Is there a thing that turns you on, even if it feels confusing, gross or weird? Tell more!') was directly leading in inviting articulations of a register of encounters with porn where disgust merged with sexual arousal, probing the esoterica of porn likes in shades of extremity. Among the thousand or so women answering the question, many rejected the association of confusion, grossness and weirdness with their sexual and/or pornographic fantasies. Yet many more elaborated on the ambiguities they felt towards the imageries that sexually aroused them, as well as the degrees to which they had grown comfortable with all this. Responses to the question probed the appeal of extremity, and form the material for this article.

In the course of my collaboration with the staff of *Jenny+*, I was granted research access to the survey. The study participants contributed their replies to a journalistic project to be cited in this context. There was no informed consent towards later research uses, yet it is unlikely that the respondents could be harmed by the fully anonymous data being repurposed for scholarly ends, given that its journalistic uses, in the television show, podcast and beyond, involved much greater degrees of publicness than an academic article ever could. And, given my own participation in the journalistic process, scholarly insight was inbuilt in the planned uses of the survey data. Expanding on the material outside the context of *Jenny+* is then a means of adding granularity to the analysis conducted for the show. Translations from the material below are mine and made with the intention of communicating their original style or tone.

‘I [...] doubt that my vision represents the female majority view’

Many respondents commented on and critiqued the provocative question prompt (‘Is there a thing that turns you on, even if it feels confusing, gross or weird? Tell more!’) for framing sexual and pornographic fantasies in shameful, bizarre and gross tones. Some merely responded with a laconic ‘no’. Others elaborated: ‘I don’t think of my fantasies as disgusting or odd’; ‘Nothing that turns you on should feel gross or odd’; or ‘Sure, I have those kinks but I’m ok with them so they’re no longer confusing, disgusting or odd’. As these responses already indicate, the confusing,

gross, weird, marginal and extreme qualities of the porn enjoyed had a great deal to do with the dynamics of domination and submission where women were positioned at the bottom. Within these, the detachment of one's own fantasy preferences from those of other women was recurrent, even as the scenarios described were, to a degree, repetitive. An interesting tension then emerged between individual likes, the survey designed for female respondents and the category of 'women' as evoked by the study participants, some of whom positioned their own enjoyment taken in scenarios of rough sex, domination, humiliation and non-consent squarely against female tastes more generally:

I find it ok to watch women being dominated and hurt although many other women probably don't like that.

I'm no longer confused by this but in my 20s it felt wrong as a woman to like submission, to watch bukkake, gangbang, and group sex stuff; the porn advertised for women was always romantic, progressed slowly, came with romantic music and other 'soft' stuff. Now on the verge of middle age it's no longer confusing or embarrassing to admit that this doesn't interest or arouse me, I skip all stuff advertised as being 'for couples' [...] Sure, romantic porn has its place, it was closer to me as well when I was younger (in my teens/twenties); surely most women would nevertheless watch something like that, and people like me who watch more, who have clearly their own taste, are in the minority among women ... Or, I don't know, an interesting question, what kinds of porn do women like on average?

BDSM. For a cum fetishist also bukkake. I'd find pleasure in innovative hardcore submission and enslavement, with all the condiments (without pain-centred sadism) and, for the most part, it need not be so nice for the underdog. But I nevertheless doubt my vision represents the female majority point of view.

Many survey respondents distinguished their likes from those of women in general, while also plying their pornographic preferences apart from the ethical, political and moral values that they themselves lived by, and the sexual scenarios they wished to engage with other people:

Rough sex of the sort where the man only cares about his own pleasure and the woman would seem to prefer being somewhere else, and perhaps also feels a little pain. I really don't like this kind of sex in real life but for some reason it turns me on the most in porn.

This is in line with findings of Karen Ciclitira's (2004, 292) study where some of her informants 'commented explicitly that they personally enjoyed porn despite disagreeing with it politically', possibly feeling guilty about it. Given the feminist bent of *Jenny+*, it is unsurprising that the study participants regularly reflected on the gendered politics of porn they preferred to consume, and their occasionally ambivalent feelings towards it:

Really brutal physical submission of the female-gendered. Sometimes I fear playing into the hands of patriarchy with my porn use, and that my arousal isn't 'real' but that I'm conditioned by misogynistic crap.

As a feminist, it's annoying to be turned on by DP [double penetration].

The submission, objectification, and use of women. It's particularly arousing if it's not play but it's more like a young woman has been persuaded to make porn for money. That's disgusting/confusing as I'm a very social equality minded person and really wouldn't, rationally thinking, want anyone but well considering and mentally balanced people to be making porn and such, so that they wouldn't be ashamed of their performances afterwards. Nor would I ever have this type of sex myself. I believe that many other things considered forbidden/negative/even sick would interest me in sex but I prefer not to go there at all - I don't think of that which I consider sick any further, and I really wouldn't search for that sort of porn.

I'm turned on by submission although I don't do it in real life. It's fascinated me since I was little, and made me ashamed, too. [...] It's in such conflict with how I truly think about the position of women and men, and I think that no man who really has respect for women would even know how to act like in the clips I've watched. He wouldn't be relationship material, so to speak.

Conflicts and discrepancies between pornographic fantasies and ethical and/or political views were not, however, seen merely as sources of unease. They were also recognized as those which fuel sexual fantasies, and hold value as such even as, for some respondents, tensions remained:

Maledom. I often fantasize about dystopias where women's destiny is pretty harsh. There's only room for young beautiful women and even for them, only as servants and sexual toys. I'm a pretty militant feminist and insist on full equality in my relationships. This conflict between submission and [those fantasies] feels pretty odd although I consider it all natural on the other hand, as fantasies are fantasies.

Others more readily embraced their preferred pornographic scenarios even while juxtaposing them with their other lived experiences, interests, attachments and identifications. For them, porn was something 'more' or 'something else' than the things they wished to experiment together with sexual partners:

As far as I understand, all my fetishes (=being tied down, rape fantasies, etc.) are relatively common. Someone might consider the large contrast between my sexual fantasies and real life as somehow off or 'unfeminine': porn and imagination are for me one sick fantasy that I'd NEVER EVER want to act out in real life. Not even in a safe environment and consensually. Straightforward action, penetration-centrism, and sexual abuse arouses in porn and in my own head, but not at all in real life.

As in this quotation, boundary work around fantasies became particularly manifest in the context of non-consensual and violent scenarios. Scenes of rape were recurrently marked out as ones that, if or when experienced in real life, are purely the stuff of trauma while all the same holding magnetic appeal in the realm of fantasy:

Rape. I've experienced it, and there was nothing arousing about it, but STILL being taken against consent is one of my key fantasies, perhaps by many people, too. In addition, I'm turned on by faceless men. With a mask, or otherwise faceless. This is perhaps the basis for my fascination with gas masks.

Women being raped turns me on although I'm morally against it.

For some reason, I'm turned on by the idea of being taken by force, even if in real life it'd probably be the worst thing imaginable.

Some study participants juxtaposed the appeal of non-consent and scenarios otherwise deemed extreme with romance, thus marking their preferences apart from the category of 'pornography for women' foregrounding relationships, intimacy, female desire and sexual agency (Johnson 1993; Royalle 1993). In these responses, romantic framings deemed feminine came across as safe, boring and ultimately uninteresting:

We watch porn for the fucking, not for romantic tiptoeing. Watching incest porn is perhaps oddly arousing although I've really never wanted to fuck my dad or stepdad. Also, non-consent (rape) is a turn-on although I absolutely wouldn't want to be raped in real life.

It's also thrilling if people act with horny directness in the situation and if the woman isn't necessarily treated with respect as a feminist subject and a cerebral being, but is given a proper go. I just can't be bothered

watching a sweet loving honeybun-couple making love tenderly with appropriate respect. :-D.

Some respondents focused on the qualities of their preferred scenes: 'I'm turned on by a woman being raped / taken against her consent, preferably by many men. As long as the woman doesn't seem to enjoy it at any point.' Others foregrounded consent within the ethics of porn production: 'Female submission and pain. A couple of tears is so hot already! Obviously so that it's acting, or that you can somehow prove that she consents to it.' Even as concerns and misgivings about production practices were voiced, a feminist framework categorically critical of pornography's gendered politics remained virtually absent. This is in contrast to Ciclitira's (2004) study where several interviewees returned to the perspectives of anti-pornography feminism, and to those of Andrea Dworkin in particular, when considering the ethical and political stakes involved in pornography.

This may have to do with the Finnish survey participants being younger than those responding to Ciclitira's (2004) study - mainly born in the 1980s - but, I argue, even more centrally with the position of pornography in feminist debates in the country. Unlike in the USA or the UK, pornography did not become a key symbolic issue for second-wave feminism that was much more concerned with policies concerning reproductive rights, public childcare, equality in the workplace and the possibilities for women to combine family life with paid work (see Kantola 2006). Nor has pornography later become a topic of heated public debate or contestation, unlike in the neighbouring country

of Sweden. According to nationally representative survey data, Finnish attitudes towards pornography are markedly positive, especially so among people aged 30–40 years: in this age bracket, approximately 75% of women (and over 90% of men) describe porn as ‘highly arousing’ (Väestöliitto 2017). The defence of pleasure in the survey responses can further speak of culturally specific discourses foregrounding active agency as an issue of sexual health (see Helén and Yesilova 2006; Honkasalo 2018).

Reflexive, encounters, a plethora of fascinations

Some respondents found the discrepancies between their values and pornographic preferences disconcerting in the ethical laxity and suspicious politics that these seemed to communicate. As pointed out earlier, others emphasized the differences they saw between their sexual fantasies and realities, more or less explicitly defending fantasies as sources of self-pleasure. A great number of respondents, prompted by the question prompt to explore the odder qualities of their pornographic preferences, described discontinuities between their sexual orientations and the bodies and acts they preferred in porn: ‘Funnily, I’m turned on by action between women although I’m a woman who likes men’; ‘Gay sex is arousing although I’m bisexual/lesbian’; ‘Gay sex, sometimes also anal sex, ladyboys (I’m a straight woman)’; ‘As a straight woman, I’m turned on by lesbians in porn, older men’; or ‘Straight creampie, I’m 90% lesbian and like to watch creampie porn although I could never imagine being in the same position

myself, the idea of having sex with men grosses me out anyway’.

Such gaps between pornographic and other sexual preferences are no novelty in scholarship on the topic, even if continuity, correlation and causality between the two can be easily assumed. Existing studies show that straight and queer people of different genders consume lesbian and gay male pornography (for example, Neville [2018](#); Robards [2018](#)) and that people, in watching porn, seek out scenes that they would like or want to do, as well as ones that they definitely would not like or want to do (for example, McKee, Albury, and Lumby [2008](#); Smith, Attwood, and Barker [2015](#); Paasonen [2021](#)). People report watching porn for the sake of curiosity, in order to find out about sexual likes and options out there, as well as in order to just alleviate boredom. All this undermines assumptions according to which pornographic preferences merely align with a person’s sexual identity as they themselves describe it (also Barker [2014](#)). While no direct connections can be presumed between a person’s sense of sexual self and their patterns of porn consumption, there is also immediacy to sexual turn-ons that can make it difficult to detach them from ways of understanding the sexual self – and, consequently, one’s very ways of being in the world.

All of this helps to question the popular premise according to which identification – in the sense of similarity or sameness between a performer and the person watching, or between the sexual scenes witnessed and those acted out with others – is central to the enjoyment taken in pornography. Identifications of all kinds certainly

yield much joy, yet, as the survey responses indicate, the opposite equally applies. The pleasures of pornography can result from sensations of proximity, from a firm sense of distance or hover somewhere in between. Some desire a sense of relating, while for others a sense of detachment is key to pleasure taken in pornographic scenarios – it also being fully possible for one and the same person to move between fantasy settings. Most survey participants did not feel it necessary for their pornographic likes to align with either their sexual practices or with their feminist commitments to gender equality, even as such frictions were subject to reflection (see Ashton, McDonald, and Kirkman 2019, 426).

The responses, in their diversity and reflexivity, further challenge causal analyses according to which exposure to pornography – the term itself implying subjection to its forces against one's active volition or agency (Barker 2014) – causes certain kinds of sexual fantasies to emerge as an ideological effect of sorts (for example, Corne, Briere, and Esses 2002). According to this line of thinking, broadly building on Robin Morgan's (1977) radical feminist slogan 'pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' (see Morgan 1977, 169), pornography functions as a persuasive patriarchal pedagogy that renders structural power differentials, social violence and gender oppression acceptable and desirable, or 'sexy', by eroticizing them. In contrast, the survey responses framed porn as a realm of thought play where violent scenarios and social hierarchies can be revisited in a distanced vein and played with, echoing a familiar finding according to which the appeal of

porn draws its force from its embeddedness in the social roles and power relations that it exaggerates, reverts and turns quintessentially sexual. This hardly means that such roles, relations and practices remain unquestioned or accepted by porn consumers or that, by being sexually aroused by certain kinds of scenarios, they have already been hailed into ideology as its subjects, unable to resist its call (see Althusser [2006](#)).

Oh, extreme!

The survey examined in this article – similarly to other studies addressing women's pornographic preferences – further leads to questions concerning the analytical productivity of the notion of extremity, the topic of this special issue. Extremity stands for the opposite of the middle, the mild or the moderate. Consequently, extreme porn stands for that which is in contrast to the middle of the road, as encapsulated in the notion of the mainstream – as does the marginal, albeit in slightly different ways. As such a marker of (relative) social acceptability, extremity is in no direct or automatic way connected to the ethics of porn production or the working conditions of performers – as in the degrees to which their consent is fully secured, the control they have over the scenes they act out or the financial compensation that they receive. In focusing on representational content and its perceived relation to sexual normalcy – the middle, the mild, the moderate and the acceptable – the notion of extremity is bound up in the policing of sexual tastes. Shifting emphasis from the politics of representation to the ethics, labour conditions

and unequal profit revenues of contemporary porn, again, would allow for a more critically productive take on the ethics of porn.

Available knowledge on pornographic preferences points out that things deemed 'extreme' – from urination fetishes to scenes of submission and domination – are in fact mainstream in their popularity and in the frequency with which they are searched for, accessed and viewed. On the level of personal evaluation and preference, the boundaries of extremity, like those of the mainstream, are contingent and volatile, drawn in accordance with social norms governing sexual normalcy and deviancy, and speaking of great flexibility in what people classify as such. Some survey respondents identified anal sex and light power play as extreme or 'out there' in comparison to the kinds of acts they felt comfortable participating in themselves. For others, the notion of extremity was reserved for niche interests such as force-feeding or tentacle monster cartoon porn, or taboos such as incest. Yet others described their fetish preferences as exceeding most standard notions of sexual likes, from preferences for cherries, blue cotton shirts and eyeglasses on men to sewing machines, trees and patterns on bark, quadriplegic amputation, 'use of exercise ball as base, medieval etc. role costumes and swords, martial art costumes', 'mechas, or fighting machines with a pilot inside', 'sex so that the other partner (preferably female) is stuck in slime' or 'physical wounds and abnormalities ... I'm most turned on by marks left on the skin by lightning, vitiligo, albinism ...'.

When studying pornographic tastes, we are likely to discover that these vary within any demographic group, that they transform across a person's lifespans and – like any media and consumer preferences – can be singular indeed (see McKee 2006). The highly specific likes disclosed by the survey respondents equally speak of porn literacy and (sub)cultural capital. In other words, they result from extensive familiarity with available content:

Dog/animal licks something on the skin or crotch. Teen +30+ having sex. Watching animals have sex. Light domination. Young girl forces a boy or someone older to lick. Face-sitting. Anime: aliens, tentacles, furry, bara, yuri, yuki ... Male fellatio and banging/chaining up a 'tough guy'.

For some, the question was one of personal kinks, while others described broader, possibly serendipitous fascinations with online content. Respondents may also have been flaunting their expert knowledge, or even trolling the *Jenny+* team without disclosing much of their personal fantasies. Like any survey, this one does not allow for access to that which people feel, like or fantasize about, inasmuch as to the ways in which they choose to narrate and disclose this. All in all, the survey speaks of a tension between the diversity of fantasies, desires and identifications and the framework of binary gender within which these were queried after, explored and made sense of. While addressing the entire survey design and results is beyond the scope of this article, I find it noteworthy that the makers of *Jenny+* did not aim at painting a generalized picture of women's porn preferences inasmuch as inquiring after the specificity of fantasies – and especially those of more extreme nature, consequently discovering them (for a

discussion of old men as objects of pornographic fantasy in the survey, see Paasonen [2021](#)).

Will to knowledge

In a famous apocryphal excerpt from an exchange with Marie Bonaparte, Sigmund Freud wrote of his shortcomings in understanding female desire, as condensed into the question '*Was will das Weib?*' – often translated as 'What do women want?' (Elms [2001](#)). The anecdote has had obvious feminist appeal in pointing to the inability of the founding figure of psychoanalysis to think of sexual difference in terms other than those of female lack and uncharted mysteries differing from the male norm. As a question impossible to answer, it holds continuing appeal. In the history of pornography, female passions of all kinds have similarly long operated as titillating yet mysterious tropes requiring acts of revelation, representation and (more or less ventriloquist) narration (see Williams [1989](#); Mudge [2000](#); Peakman [2003](#)). Meanwhile, the default porn user was long gendered firmly male, both in the popular imagination and in feminist critiques positioning the genre as made by men, for men (Beggan and Allison [2003](#); Sun et al. [2008](#), 312).

Journalistic and other popular inquiries on women's pornographic likes continue to promise answers to 'what women want' on rather general terms. The magazine *Men's Health*, building on Gert Martin Hald and Aleksandar Štulhofer's ([2016](#)) large-scale sample study on pornographic preferences, for example, produced an infographic highlighting gendered similarities and

differences. According to this visualization, male users search more for 'amateur', 'big breasts' and 'anal sex', all users like 'oral sex' and 'threesomes', and female users are particularly drawn to the categories of 'soft-core', 'gangbang' and 'large penises' (Sgobba [2015](#)). Despite the study drawing on a specifically Croatian sample, and hence involving a particular social setting, contextual nuance disappeared as *Men's Health* simply focused on categorical gendered likes under the title 'These Are the Kinds of Porn Men and Women Watch the Most'. That which was the case in Croatia then became the case anywhere.

This logic is hardly surprising as such, given the expansive power that binary understandings of gender continue to hold across regional, linguistic and cultural differences. As feminist and queer critiques have pointed out over numerous decades, binary gender models highlight differences between men and women while effacing differences within these categories. Notions of binary difference meander from religious texts to demographical overviews, commodity markets and labour practices as ubiquitous modes of making sense of the world and the people within it. In the realm of sexuality, gender binary becomes routinely mapped onto normative heterosexuality so that male-presenting bodies are assumed to be attracted to female-presenting ones, and vice versa (see Butler [1990](#)). This binary framework for thinking about identity, embodiment and desire effaces differences in the realms of gender and sexuality alike, offering possibly seductive clarity to the complex ways in which bodies desire one another, understand themselves

and form attachments with people, representations and object-life alike.

It then follows that in overviews such as the *Men's Health* article, 'women', as an expansive yet discursively unified category, becomes understandable against that of men with routine ease. It even seems that virtually any study, independent of its sample size or context, can be taken as similarly indicative of that which women want. To illustrate gender-specific pornographic preferences, journalists regularly turn to data published by Pornhub, the leading porn video aggregator site, most likely since there is scarcity of representative, or just large-scale, data on the uses of pornography, and since coverage of the topic is guaranteed to attract the attention of readers, and to subsequently generate clicks, reads, shares and likes that fuel the online attention economy. Pornhub data come with numerous caveats as the parameters of collection are not public knowledge and there is no way to verify the validity of the data shared. Nor are searches and views on a video aggregator site, no matter how massive, simply representative of porn preferences globally. The easy accessibility and rich supply of user data published by Pornhub (and, less systematically, by the competing xHamster), occasionally in collaboration with news sites, has nevertheless resulted in something of a conflation between the two in ways that further bolster the company's dominant position on the markets of online porn (see Auerbach [2014](#); Rodeschini [2020](#)).

In 2014, Pornhub collaborated with the entertainment and news site BuzzFeed on an item titled 'What Women

Want' (Pornhub 2014). Within its binary discursive arrangement, women were found to view the categories 'for women', 'lesbian', 'solo male', 'hardcore', 'rough sex', 'double penetration', 'gangbang', 'bondage' and 'threesome' notably more often than men. In addition to searching 901% more for 'eating pussy' and 792% more for 'pussy licking' than male users, women searched for porn featuring large penises, older men, double penetrations and gangbangs. For International Women's Day 2018, Pornhub teamed up with *Newsweek* for an article titled 'Pornhub Data Reveals What Women Want' (Gaudette 2018) detailing gender-specific user data – even as the data were not specific inasmuch as bluntly generalizing in their binary logic. On the following International Women's Day, the site broke user data down by country and US states, revealing a range of more regional likes, from the British women's penchant for 'rough sex' to the popularity of 'pissing' among Japanese and German women (Pornhub 2019). All of these findings were broadly covered on clickbait sites.

In addition to building on published research or collaborating with a data giant like Pornhub, journalistic outlets carry out their own studies for mapping women's pornographic likes – as did the makers of *Jenny+*. In some instances, sample sizes can be so small that, within the logic of synecdoche, a handful of women get to speak for the gender as a whole. Consider, for example, a 2017 *Metro* article titled 'What Kind of Porn Turns Her On?' that interviewed four women and discovered them to be watching 'stuff I would do, or have done, or would like to do'; 'gangbang'; 'hardcore BDSM caning' and 'public

disgrace' scenes, as well as ones where 'old men gangbang young blonde 20-somethings' (Lynch 2017). For its part, a 2015 *Marie Claire* study with an impressive 3000+ respondents spoke of women's active consumption of porn yet without venturing into their specific likes, focusing on their overall attitudes and feelings towards porn instead (De Cadenet 2015).

These examples speak of how both the ways of perceiving gendered differences and the possibilities of generating knowledge about them become issues of methodology in the context of porn. Small sample sizes and generalizations aside, in quantitative approaches, gender (arguably seen as binary by default) operates as an input variable according to which data are classified and analyzed. Meanwhile, qualitative approaches render visible granularities, complexities and variations within any sets of data. The listings and infographics published by Pornhub render visible gendered use patterns through vast volumes of data allowing for broad insights into tastes, search and viewing practices. Having a look at pornmd.com instead, a live stream of the searches made in the Pornhub network (encompassing all video aggregator sites owned by the parent company, MindGeek, including RedTube, YouPorn, Tube8, etc.) reveals a drastically different landscape where, just now, one user searches for 'satanist', another for '3D machines' and a third for 'british lucky old guy', showing how broad trends become crafted out of possibly esoteric things.

It is inescapable that a quantitative focus on regularities and trends overshadows the diversity and range of data

from which such regularities and trends emerge. Quantitative inquiry helps to make visible degrees of diversity, as in analyses pointing to female porn consumers' preference for content featuring lesbian sex, cunnilingus, gangbangs or large penises, repeated across studies. At the same time, the diversity of desires involved in the sexual allure of cherries, mechas, vitiligo, sewing machines, amputations and blue cotton shirts that emerged in the *Jenny+* survey becomes obscured in large-scale studies as 'noise', unless these combine multiple methods of interpretation moving between the mass with the more specific (see Attwood, Smith, and Barker 2019). My point is not that women's pornographic likes are not important objects of study – very much quite the contrary. My concern is how this is done, towards what ends and on what basis.

Women, obviously enough, are people. And studies of porn use, like all studies of media reception, show that people enjoy different things. The logic of binary gender falls short of explaining much of tastes, values, investments, fantasies and their intermeshing complexities. In order for scholarship to not obscure other differences that matter, gender needs to be seen as one identity category among others, shaped by social relations of power through which selves come about through and as intersecting positionalities (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991). Or, more simply put: a focus on gender as a primary axis of difference bolsters commonsensical notions of binary gender and pushes other identity categories and the norms, hierarchies and practices of governance to the background in unhelpful ways.

While this is a simple, and perhaps self-evident argument to make, I find it remains important in a discursive landscape dotted with recurrent quests to uncover that which women are assumed to want, whether this is through big data analyses à la Pornhub, the methods of which are not ours to access, or through popular questionnaires interested in the variable of gender alone. Such pursuits involve the will to produce knowledge over something that cannot be accounted for through generalizations – namely, sexual fantasies and desires. They further speak of taxonomical interests where pornographic likes become mapped onto, and possibly fixed, through a gender binary. The notion of extremity – simultaneously ephemeral, malleable and rife with affective force – operates in this less as a content classifier or marker of taste than as a normative tool for drawing the mainstream apart from its opposite, and for pulling acceptable desires apart from those risking the stigma of deviance and perversion. Critical studies of sexuality focusing on the uses of porn remain key for shifting the focus of public debate towards complexities in how people make sense of their sexual selves within and across intersecting categories of identity, within which sexual desire is never just binary. Here, unorthodox questions on extreme pornographic likes, no matter how leading, can be productive places to start.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Academy of Finland [Grant Number 327391].

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